

## Ribbon of Kancamagus wraps forest's gifts

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

KANCAMAGUS HIGHWAY, N.H. — It's always tempting to drive the roughly 35 miles between Lincoln and Conway, N.H., in one exhilarating rush, enjoying the banked turns, broad vistas, and wall of trees. In summer, the trunks of white and silver birches seem to gleam. In fall, the blur of color verges on the hallucinogenic, making Route 112 one of New England's most popular foliage drives.

But drive-by leaf-peeping is no substitute for a walk in the woods. The Kanc also offers access to numerous trails so it can be driven in short stretches, which gives travelers a chance to get out of the car and into the landscape.

If you plan to make a day of it, pack a lunch. Most of the highway passes through the White Mountain National Forest, and you'll only find food and gas at either end.

It's best to travel from east to west, stopping first at the Saco District ranger station to pick up a National Forest day-use permit and a map of the Kanc and all the stops. The majority of them are concentrated in the first half, and most come up on the right. So while you'll be driving uphill most of the way, facing a wall of forested mountains, occasional stops won't require as many left-hand turns across heavy fall foliage traffic.

About 6 miles west of the ranger station, make a sharp right into the parking lot for the Albany covered bridge. It's a

short walk to the 120-foot span, built in 1858 and renovated in 1970. The weathered wooden bridge is a prime photo stop.

On our last visit, we encountered Richard Kennedy and Lynn Becher, who were exploring the White Mountains on their Harley-Davidson. The Canton, Ohio, couple weren't sure they'd try ascending Mount Washington on the Auto Road, but they gave a definite thumbs-up for the thrill of the ride on the Kanc. They stopped for a picture at the bridge, then hit the road to seek other bridges off Route 16.

If you want to linger, take the paved walkway along the river that leads east down to a fishing pier and continues toward the campground. In the other direc-

tion, unpaved Deer Brook Road, which is closed to motor vehicles, heads along the riverbank.

Perhaps the best place to picnic along the Kanc is Lower Falls, only a half-mile west from the bridge turnout. Picnic tables sit beneath a covered pavilion overlooking the Swift River as it splashes down on boulders. The cool green pools below the biggest rocks are popular for cooling off in the summer, but as the weather chills, you'll probably want to stay dry by scrambling from boulder to boulder.

The sun-warmed granite ledges at Rocky Gorge Scenic Area, another 2 miles west, could lull you into a gecko afternoon of basking in the golden light. The National Forest Service has mounted informational plaques at many stops along the Kanc. Those at Rocky Gorge supply a lesson in geology, explaining that melt-water from the mile-high Wisconsin ice sheet began etching the gorge from the granite bedrock some 10,000 years ago. If there's been recent rain, the Swift shoots through the narrows here with a small but aggressive cascade best viewed from the wooden bridge over the gorge.

Across the bridge, a woodsy trail carpeted with pine needles leads to minuscule Falls Pond. The stocked trout stay in the coldest, deepest water even into early fall, but a strong cast might grab their attention — or at least that's what Al Yurof of Plainville, Mass., was hoping when we disturbed his reverie. "Oh, I'm just waving at the water," he said. For an easy, mostly flat half-hour walk in the woods, the Lovequist Loop Trail circles the pond.

The Russell-Colbath Historic Site, 4 miles west, is a favorite rainy-day stop on the Kanc — site interpreter Carol Felice often bakes something to cheer soggy travelers. But whatever the weath-

KANCAMAGUS, Page M9



er, the spot also offers a glimpse of the now-vanished hamlet of Passaconaway.

The house dates from 1832, and was occupied at least part of the year through the mid-1960s. It still lacks electricity or running water, and Felice and volunteer guides help visitors imagine living here when Passaconaway was still something of a frontier town.

"People are amazed that you can participate in whatever we're doing," says Felice. "They can help me garden or spin wool. They can crank the gears on the washing machine or, if they're musical, play the pump organ. They often remember that great-grandmother had something like this, but here they're allowed to touch it."

Only the house and adjoining graveyard remain from the village, which peaked at about 1,500 people during the timber boom. New signs along the wheelchair-accessible, half-mile Rail 'N River Nature Trail behind the homestead sketch the larger picture of the birth and death of Passaconaway and the timber industry here.

Some of the tallest masts for the English king's navy were trundled out of these woods with as many as 80 oxen, and the valley farmers spent their winters cutting trees. The railroad made clear-cutting feasible, and the Swift River Railroad and the Conway Lumber Co. brought in more than 1,000 loggers between 1906 and 1916, when the companies rushed to clear-cut the hills before Congress could pass laws to stop them. When the trees were gone, only a few farms remained.

But another industry had already arisen. Tourists began visiting the White Mountains in the 1860s. In 1880, the proprietor of the Passaconaway House, a hotel that stood 3 miles west of the Russell-Colbath homestead, cut a trail from his lodging into the woods so guests could hike to a dramatic falls that makes a 90-degree angle in its tumble down the mountain. The hotel burned in 1916, but the

trail persists as a hemlock-shaded path along Sabbaday Brook to Sabbaday Falls. The most telling vantage is from the foot of the falls, where a strip of basalt in the granite hints at the geologic fault that gives this falls its kink.

Heading west from the Sabbaday Falls stop, the road seems to climb into the sky. The Sugar Hill Scenic Vista overlooks a string of mountains lined up along the northern horizon like soldiers on the march. The Kanc gets even steeper for the ascent to the C.L. Graham Wangan overlook. This stopover, where mountain bikers often take a well-deserved rest, is tucked into the slope a few yards east of the Kancamagus Pass, the 2,855-foot highest point on the scenic byway. From the pass, the road swirls down a 9 percent grade as a great bowl spreads below, dotted with autumn colors in the black-green of a hemlock forest. It's time to just enjoy the drive, all the way to Lincoln.

*Patricia Harris and David Lyon, freelance writers from Cambridge, can be reached at harris.lyon@verizon.net.*

## If you go . . .

### How to get there

From Boston, follow Interstate 93 north to I-95 north. Pick up the Spaulding Turnpike (Route 16) north to Conway. Turn left on Route 112, Kancamagus Highway.

### What to do

#### Kancamagus Highway

Contact Saco Ranger District office, White Mountain National Forest  
33 Kancamagus Highway  
Conway, N.H.  
603-447-5448  
Daily 8-4:30 through October.  
Parking \$3 per day, \$5 per week, \$20 per year.

#### Russell-Colbath Historic Site

Friday-Sunday 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. at

least through Columbus Day, free.

### Where to stay

#### Kancamagus Swift River Inn

1316 Kancamagus Highway (1.5 miles east of Route 16)

Albany, N.H.

866-505-6274

swiftriverinn.com

Ten simple but spacious rooms.

Doubles \$79-\$99 through Sept. 27, \$99-\$129 Sept. 28-Oct. 15. Rates include continental breakfast.

#### Darby Field Inn & Restaurant

185 Chase Hill Road

Albany, N.H.

603-447-2181, 800-426-4147

darbyfield.com

Inn has 13 rooms, some with fireplace or Jacuzzi. Doubles from mid-September through October \$160-\$290 with full breakfast. Dinner entrees \$22-\$28; daily through foliage season.

### Where to eat

#### Half Baked & Fully Brewed

187 Main St.

Lincoln, N.H.

603-745-8811

Daily 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Deli, cafe, and coffee house has an extensive menu of panini (\$6-\$7) and smoothies (\$3.95-\$5.95).



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**The many boulders of Lower Falls make a cool perch.**



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**A wooden bridge spans the Swift River at Rocky Gorge.**